

Sessional Statement

Mr. Speaker, as we begin the final sitting of the Second Session of the Legislative Assembly, many people are looking back at the past two years and our mandate successes. We have many successes to look at and we will discuss them in more detail during this sitting. Right now, I want to look in a different direction, Mr. Speaker. Today, I want to talk about the future of the North.

When I think about what the Northwest Territories will look like in 20 years, I see a healthy and prosperous territory built on Northern strengths and advantages. I see residents who have good-paying jobs built on the foundation of responsible resource development, and do not have to rely on income assistance to survive. I see residents who are able to purchase their own homes and healthy foods, and who are able to provide for their children and help them reach their life goals. I see residents breaking the hold of colonialism to achieve economic self-determination.

At the same time, Mr. Speaker, I recognize that the Northwest Territories does not exist in a vacuum. We are part of a bigger confederation and subject to social and economic trends that affect the country and the world. If we are to achieve our vision of a healthy and prosperous territory, we need a plan that takes these trends into account. That plan also needs to strategically rely on the ingenuity and determination of Northwest Territories residents and the natural wealth of the land.

Late last month, I hosted my counterparts from Yukon and Nunavut to discuss how we are working together to ensure that Northerners have increasing opportunities including good jobs close to home and sustainable communities.

We share in a unified vision for the North that will give Northerners a fair and equitable chance to create strong communities, stable and diversified economies and clean environment.

We agree that responsible, sustainable development and economic diversification are keys to enhancing prosperity and wellness in remote communities by creating jobs and facilitating reconciliation for all territorial residents.

The foundation of the Northwest Territories' economy is resource development, Mr. Speaker. Natural resources are not only key to growing and sustaining our economic future, but are also essential to lowering the cost of living, as well as developing our residents through training, educational and capacity building opportunities

Currently, the resource sector accounts for nearly 40% of our GDP. By comparison, tourism accounts for 3.5% and fishing .01%. Diversifying our economy is critical to providing opportunities for our residents and we have begun that work in agriculture, fisheries, manufacturing and knowledge economy to improve the possibility of economic prosperity.

While growing and diversifying our economy is a priority for our government, resource development will continue to be the territory's main source of jobs and prosperity for the foreseeable future. Mr. Speaker, it will be the strong, stable foundation that diversification is built upon, at the same time as it provides jobs to our residents, opportunities to our communities and revenues to support government programs and services.

If we are to achieve a brighter future for the generations to come, Northern leaders need to be setting the vision for the North. Decisions about the future of Canada's North have a direct impact on the lives and economic future of our residents. We cannot simply rely on the good intentions of others to look out for the needs of our people. The Northwest Territories deserves an opportunity to participate fully in the Canadian economy, and our people the opportunity to achieve economic self-determination.

We also cannot overlook, Mr. Speaker, the link between economic independence and reconciliation with Indigenous people, including here in the North. Meaningful self-determination requires having the resources to make and implement your own choices.

Creating this kind of a future was the focus of discussion between myself and Premiers Taptuna and Silver last month. We are optimistic about the future and are actively working to balance environmental preservation and economic development to achieve wellness and prosperity throughout our communities, particularly in rural and remote Indigenous communities.

We agreed that investment in economic infrastructure, people, and sustainable communities are critical steps in ensuring that territorial residents thrive socially, economically and are contributing members of the Canadian federation.

We also agreed the three territories need a vision for sustainable development that reflects what Northerners want and need, not what somebody else thinks is best for us.

In particular, the federal government needs to stop making unilateral decisions that will have long-lasting impacts for the North. Significant decisions around resource development, environmental regulation, and indigenous relations that have an impact on the North are being made without Northerners' input.

While we recognize that these decisions may have been made with the best of intentions, we are concerned about the unintended impacts on the Northern economy and how we govern ourselves.

The Prime Minister has said he is committed to growing the middle class by making sure people have access to good, well-paying jobs. Northerners and their governments want the same thing for themselves. I hope the Prime Minister understands that the best jobs in our territories come from resource development and sectors that support it.

I also hope the Prime Minister understands that the North is the one area of the country where great strides have already been taken towards reconciliation with Indigenous people. As far back as 20 years ago, the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, or RCAP,

noted that “the North is the part of Canada in which Aboriginal people have achieved the most in terms of political influence and institutions appropriate to their cultures and needs.”

At the same time, however, the Commission noted that “the North itself is a region with little influence over its own destiny. Most of the levers of political and economic power continue to be held outside the North and, in some cases, outside Canada.”

We have made some moves to change that, most notably with devolution here in the Northwest Territories, but that transition is not complete. Twenty years later, Northerners are still being left out of decisions that affect their land, communities and families.

Completing that transition will be essential to our ongoing self-determination and our economic future. Canada’s recent decision to reorganize the federal Department of Indigenous and Northern Affairs provides an opportunity to rethink the relationship between our two governments and honour the intent of devolution agreements and the modern treaties we have been negotiating in the North.

Mr. Speaker, all regions of the country deserve a fair and equitable chance to create strong, communities for healthy, educated people, stable and diversified economies and a clean environment. That is all we want. We have an opportunity as a nation to transform the North in a way that will create huge social and economic benefits for its people and that all Canadians can be proud of by investing in its people, its economy and its infrastructure.

As we take time during the upcoming mid-term review to look back at our progress as a government, I encourage Members to also look ahead to the kind of territory we hope to leave to our children and grandchildren and the vision we need to get there.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.